'Without Peter George in the post-Stein era, Ladbrokes would not have survived' Chris Bell leads tribute to 'boss, mentor and close friend', who has died aged 63.

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Title Annotation: *Sports*
Article Type: *Obituary*
Date: *Jan 7, 2007*
Words: *912*
Publication: *The Racing Post (London, England)*
ISSN: *0968-3364*

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LADBROKES'S standing in the world of bookmaking would have sunk had Peter George not been there to take over from Cyril Stein: the summing up yesterday from chief executive Chris Bell about his "boss, mentor and close friend" George, who died on Thursday aged 63.

Other former colleagues spoke of George, who had 37 years' unbroken service with Ladbrokes after joining as a 20-year-old trainee in 1963, as "a true gentleman, who got on with everybody".

George died at his home in Los Angeles after losing his battle against lung cancer.

He was born the son of a bookmaker in Dorking on October 3, 1943, and rose through the ranks to become group CEO at Ladbrokes, which by then included Hilton hotels, in 1994, the year the national lottery was introduced, and socalled industry experts were forecasting the death of betting shops and advising George to sell the high-street estate.

Bell said: "Peter was a visionary, just like Cyril Stein before him. He'd already shown his skills by getting in the right people to take the company forward, and he backed us.

"If there had been no Peter George in the post-Cyril era, Ladbrokes would not have survived. The company wouldn't be what it is today without him."

Bell, whom George recruited in 1990, added: "If you think of the drive that Cyril had, it's a measure of Peter's ability that he could work with him, and stand up to him if necessary, and he then took over a great company to become even greater, with a passion and pride that never left him."

Speaking from Israel, where he is on holiday, former Ladbrokes chairman Stein recalled his first meeting with George: "He was 6ft 2in tall, lanky, and looked as if he needed a good meal."

Stein added: "Peter was a bookmaker's son but he didn't get on with his father and wrote to me for a job. He started working on the field book in the credit office, but he was good with figures and we put him on the rails alongside Dickie Gaskell, though it wasn't long before he took over

his own pitch."

Stein explained that George "was wasted on the rails" ("the story was we never made a bean on the racecourse but Peter quickly learned the trade," said Bell) and he was recalled to the company's Harrow HQ, first as head of the betting division and eventually as managing director of the whole Ladbrokes operation.

Stein added: "Peter had a warm personality and everybody liked him. As a businessman he was very calm, and he made it his job to get to know what was going on in the world of betting, which is why Ladbrokes became a leader in technology."

While George was running the betting side, John Jarvis was brought in as MD of the hotels division by Stein, who said: "Peter's strength was in betting. He came from that background, and that was always his big interest."

Jarvis left Ladbrokes to start his own hotels chain, while George became chief executive of the group, to which Stakis hotels was added in 1999, when the name was changed to Hilton to reflect the hotels influence.

Jarvis said: "I had tremendous admiration for Peter's energy, talent and knowledge of betting.

"He was a man of true integrity in an industry where there are some pretty mixed characters."

Outside Ladbrokes, George played a significant part in the betting industry for 20 years.

He was a leading light in the formation of Bola (now the ABB) and the recruitment of its director-general Tom Kelly' he was behind the lobby to cut the rate of betting duty, while also setting up a tax-free telephone betting operation in Gibraltar, and he personally offered advice to the early promoters of the BHB.

George also backed the foundation in 1987 of SIS, whose driving force, former Mecca boss Bob Green, said from Philadelphia: "Peter was a true gentleman, and I had the highest regard for him as an individual.

"He was a guy of high integrity and strong judgement, and though he was a formidable competitor, especially when we bought out William Hill and overtook the Ladbrokes business, I was delighted to count him as a friend."

George stood down as group chief executive in May 2000 and left the company three months later, when he moved to live in Los Angeles with his American wife Kay.

He quickly missed the pace of business and joined Park Place Entertainment as head of international development. Park Place later acquired Caesars Worldwide and changed its name to Caesars Entertainment, but was bought in 2005 by Harrah's, with whom George remained until his death.

Bell said: "Peter was not only my mentor and boss, he became a close friend who I saw socially after he left the company - and that's a true measure of the man. People don't always keep in contact when they leave a business.

""He was delighted when the name reverted to Ladbrokes last year, and I think he would have liked to come back to play a part in our future. Sadly, he never managed it."

George is survived by his wife Kay and daughter Sally Ann. Funeral services will be held in Los Angeles. In lieu of flowers, friends are asked to make a donation to the Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation, 200 London Road, Liverpool L3 9TA.

CAPTION(S):

Peter George: "a true gentleman"

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